

THIS IS A DRAFT

**CITABLE VERSION CAN BE FOUND IN:
HEGEL-JAHRBUCH (2019): 146-153.**

Michael Lewin, Wuppertal

HEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF KANT'S CONCEPT OF REASON: THE PROBLEM OF DIFFERENT DEMANDS

1. Introduction

According to Habermas, it was Hegel, who provoked the discourse of modernity (concerning the question, which principle should be the main point of orientation in philosophy) by creating an overwhelming concept of *reason* as *absolute knowledge* or *absolute idea*.¹ While this notion of reason should be strong enough to solve the problems of the modern times—such as divide between society and religion, between concept and reality etc.—and lead to the *reconciliation* (*Versöhnung*) of different entities, it turned out to be unfit to analyze recent occurrences in a satisfactory way. The Hegelian system seemed to omit the facticity and to devalue actuality as “‘occidental’, ‘transient’, ‘insignificant’, ‘fleeting’, ‘stunted’ existence of a ‘bad infinity’”². From this point on we can recognize at least two important directions which had an impact on the philosophy of the last century. On the one hand, the Left and the Right Hegelians tried to use the richness of Hegel's thoughts and structures by means of a *modest* concept of reason in the sense of *rationality*. Nietzsche, on the other hand, started the project of the farewell to modernity by trying to unmask the reason as an unhealthy form of the *will to power*—which was continued by Horkheimer, Adorno, Heidegger and the French post-modernists.³

Habermas' analysis of different ways of dealing with the concept of reason, as well as his own program of *communicative reason*, does not pay enough attention to the *problem of different demands*. This is however important to consider the specific value and function of a position or a counter position. *Demands* or claims are imaginations of certain tasks, which a person or a theory, concept etc. should fulfill. If an author or a group of researchers see that a position or a theory does not meet important requirements or that they are set too high they either modify or discard it. The problem is (a) that the decision regarding which demands are necessary, must be made and justified in a complex nexus of different factors and (b) that a final agreement seems to be impossible. The history of philosophical meanings and

¹ See JÜRGEN HABERMAS, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, translated by Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1987, 41–44 and 53.

² Ibid. 53–54.

³ See Michael LEWIN, „Psychologischer Skeptizismus. Nietzsches Kritik am Deutschen Idealismus“, in: *Coincidentia. Zeitschrift für europäische Geistesgeschichte* 8/2 (2017), 383–406.

evaluations of reason which appears as an *open concept* is a good example of this.⁴ Simply put, everyone can understand by and demand from reason whatever she wants.

In this paper the problem of different demands will be used as an interpretative method. This means that we will look closely at the functions of reason which it should have to match certain posited demands. The two following theses can be advanced and examined:

- (a) Hegel's demands on the idea of reason surpass Kant's, which is the reason for his critique and determines the methodology in the *Encyclopedia*;
- (b) these high demands and expectations on their part lead to the problem of their justification and conceal certain advantages of the Kantian account of reason.

We will begin (2) with the analysis of three different demands Hegel puts on the concept of reason in the first part of the *Encyclopedia*, which are of 2.1. *epistemological*, 2.2. *functional* and 2.3. *methodological* nature, and see how the critique of "subjective idealism" emerges from them. Afterwards (3) we will outline two possible problems with Hegel's demands and suggest that he overlooks the broad functional structure of the Kantian concept of reason as the faculty of principles.

2. Demands and critique

2.1. Epistemological demands

To understand the core of Hegel's concept of reason we have to consider his attitude towards common sense realism and pre-Kantian metaphysics. One of the main tasks in Hegel's broadly conceived project of *reconciliation* is to overcome the divide between objects and thoughts. The skeptical assumption of the critical philosophy that our mind is not able to reach the interior of things and to uncover the truth interferes with naïve assumptions in everyday life, in the praxis of sciences and in traditional metaphysics. In Hegel's view, the "presupposition, that the cognition of things as they are *in-themselves* results from the

⁴ As Schnädelbach points out, the history of philosophy shows that "reason" is an open concept developed by perpetual critique on it and that its different meanings do not allow a final systematization – cf. HERBERT SCHNÄDELBACH, *Vernunft*, Stuttgart 2007, 14. Schnädelbach also does not explicitly reflect upon the clashing demands which drive and determine the critique.

thinking of what is” (§ 28),⁵ is on a higher level than the Kantian epistemological position.⁶ Insofar as Kant insists that thoughts are merely *our* thoughts he loses the most important criterion for truth, i.e. the objectivity of content (§ 22).⁷ It would be however a misunderstanding to assume that Hegel has a simple realistic correspondence theory in mind. It is true on the one hand, that philosophy has to be in accord with actuality and experience (§ 6). But Hegel does not call everything which is in the senses, “actuality” (*Wirklichkeit*). This complex concept designates only reasonable structures of the world and omits transient and insignificant appearances. Thus, the link between the content of objects and thoughts can be established on the supposition that reason is already present and contained in things. Philosophical thinking is in this sense just decoding what is already there—from the religious point of view: the world, created and governed by God—and not encoding it, leaving the things-in-themselves as an unrecognized remain.

This epistemological position of *absolute idealism* requires a comprehensive concept of reason, which extends the mere subjective understanding of it as a *faculty* to the notion of *universal reasonability* (*Vernünftigkeit*). This concept, which Hegel also names *the absolute idea, the Subject-Object, the unity of the ideal and the real* etc. (§ 214) includes both, the subjective and the objective sides, which are just certain appearances of it.⁸ It is clear that Kant’s notion of reason as a subjective faculty does not match the demands of Hegel’s epistemological position.

⁵ In this paper the focus will lie on the first part of *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. References to this work are given by corresponding paragraphs. The translations are from G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic (with the Zusätze)*, translated by T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1991. We will refer to other texts according to the pagination of Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, Frankfurt am Main 1986 (= TWA).

⁶ Hegel advances, however, three objections against this position of philosophy in its beginnings (§§ 28–32). The first metaphysicians (1) used *predicates* to determine what is true without examining their specific content and values, (2) imagined the objects of their inquiries (God, world and soul) as completed and given *representations* and (3) became *dogmatic*, as they used the either-or-logic to ascertain what is true or false. For more see Klaus BRINKMANN, “Hegel’s Critique of Kant and the Pre-Kantian Metaphysics”, in: *Hegel Reconsidered. Beyond Metaphysics and the Authoritarian State*, edited by H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr., Terry Pinkard, Dordrecht 1994, 57–78 and the chapter “Hegel’s complex relationship to ‘pre-Kantian’ metaphysics”, in: BRADY BOWMAN, *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity*, Cambridge 2013, 62–101.

⁷ Hegel distinguishes three meanings of objectivity: (1) it is something what is externally present and distinct from our subjective perception, (2) it is something universal and necessary and distinct from all what is contingent and peculiar we find in our sensation and (3) it is a central belief, that our thoughts are at the same time the *In-itself (das Ansich)* of things (§ 41). The second position is the one of Kant, the third is the one of Hegel. It is important to notice, that in Hegel’s view the things-in-themselves are not considered to be for the senses, but for the spirit. The universal behind the things does not exist externally, but is something which is articulated in our thoughts (§ 21).

⁸ It is not the idea of, but the idea *as* something or reasonability *as* something (as logic, nature and spirit, as every single step in the development of philosophical system).

2.2. *Functional demands*

If there is rationality in the world which we are part of and which we can uncover as the In-itself of things, reason should have functions corresponding to this. Kant's faculty of the unconditioned is however too weak to meet the requirements of the absolute idealism. It seems to be incapable of analyzing its own products—the ideas—and thought-determinations (the categories) on its own. The latter not only depend on an external criterion of truth—that their usage is only sensible when applied to objects of a possible experience—but they are also examined merely by means of the faculty of understanding (*Verstand*). The understanding is one of the three basic moments of reasonable thinking with the important function of differentiation and abstract fixation of isolated determinations. But it alone does not reach the truth, i.e. the required full determinacy of a concrete concept, which Hegel defines as the “unity of distinct determinations” (§§ 33, 37, 70 and 82). Hence reasonable thinking should include two other moments—the negative-rational (dialectic), which liquifies the fixed abstractions, and the positive-rational (speculative), which mediates them and comprehends their unity (§§ 81–82).

From this perspective Kant's faculty of reason does not match the functional demands of absolute idealism. Hegel agrees e.g., that we can not use the category of identity to recognize *the soul*, but not for the reason that this thought-determination is valid only on the level of experience, but rather because it is an abstract thought-determination of the understanding and therefore “not good enough” to describe such a complex object. The soul is in Hegel's view indeed identical with itself, but it should be also considered as vivid and “active, it distinguishes itself inwardly, whereas what is *only* simple [...] in an abstract way, is (for that very reason) also dead at the same time” (§ 47).

2.3. *Methodological demands*

Let us take a short look back: Hegel's epistemological demand was, that we should be able to recognize the rational In-itself of things. From this point on the functional demand emerged that reasonable thinking—the one which overcomes the one-sidedness of different determinations and uncovers the truth in appropriate way—should include three basic moments to meet the requirements of absolute idealism. Kant's concept of reason seems to be insufficient, as its functions are limited to the needs of his critical position.

The third demand arises from the previous two: If we constantly apply reasonable thinking and strive for the concrete concept of rational actuality, we produce a philosophical system. Therefore, a suitable method is required. If our object is the reasonability of the world, our system must represent reasonability itself.

This demand for what Hegel calls the “absolute method” is fulfilled with the structure of the encyclopedia, which illustrates a permanent search for the absolute idea. Not in the sense that we have to find something which is outside the world, but in the sense that we try to obtain the full meaning of it while examining a set of different objects.⁹ The absolute idea as the targeted concept of the whole (of the content of the sciences) or of the coherent universe of reasonability is a methodological stratagem.¹⁰ It has at least three following functions:

(1) It seems to avoid the discrepancy between reason, which *is*, what *is* (the actuality) and reason, which makes up the essence of spirit (in the sense of a faculty). This is possible because of the reciprocity of the point of view of the philosopher and the objects he contemplates. The reasonability is there for the one who looks at the world reasonably, it is for the one who thinks purely: “Wie der Mensch die Welt anblickt, so blickt sie ihn [an]” (TWA 10, 406)—in the way a man looks at the world, in the same way the world looks back at him. If the philosopher examines his objects with the belief, that there is an absolute idea respectively reasonability in the world, he will be able to recognize it in things and to create a corresponding system.

(2) The absolute idea in this sense has to be seen as a *telos*, not for logic, nature or the spirit, as it is already realized in them, but for the philosopher. By thinking through a set of objects of the philosophical sciences he recognizes reasonability in its different “stages” of development. Each of them is representing the idea in a restricted manner which is recognized by the dialectic and speculative thinking.

(3) This guiding function of the absolute idea as a methodological stratagem also serves the purpose of the systematical unity of the *Encyclopedia*. If reasonability is a general

⁹ At the end of the first part of *Encyclopedia* Hegel compares the final stage of the process of the (logical) absolute idea with an old man “who utters the same religious statements as the child, but for whom they carry the significance of his whole life” (§ 237).

¹⁰ The absolute idea is not the same as the concept of God or of what Kant calls the ideal (*das Ideal*) in the Transcendental Dialectic. As Angelika Nuzzo points out, Hegel’s philosophy is a monism of the absolute idea, but *not a philosophy of the Absolute* (*ens realissimum* or *ens perfectissimum* or any *ens* at all). What Hegel has in mind, is primarily a methodological thought, which rather reminds of what Kant calls *the idea of the system* as the truly *ideal* of a philosophical undertaking – see Angelica NUZZO, “,Idee‘ bei Kant und Hegel”, in: *Das Recht der Vernunft. Kant und Hegel über Denken, Erkennen und Handeln*, edited by Christel Fricke, Peter König and Thomas Petersen, Stuttgart 1995, 81–120. Following Nuzzo, we use in this paper the term *universal reasonability* (appearing as logic, nature and spirit) to express the concept *absolute idea* in other words.

determination of the objects of the sciences, the notion of the absolute idea as the golden thread must result in a broad and coherent system. It is an aspect, which unites the different kinds of appearances of reason in the world.

This demand for an absolute method in philosophy which aligns with content, as that which can “tie thought down, lead it to the matter, and maintain it there” (TWA 8, 14) seems not to be present in Kant’s works. The price for the independence of reason in the sense of a subjective faculty is the loss of the continuous connection to rational reality and therefore a lack of the appropriate method. Kant fails to master the inwardly quite differentiated content of the sciences and fails to lead it to one complete and coherent system of philosophy. This is due to the lack of the idea of reason in the sense of universal reasonability, which unfolds itself in varying ways.

3. Two problems with Hegel’s demands

As we have seen, Hegel’s demands on the concept of reason surpass Kant’s and explain the crucial points of his critique. In this last part of the paper we want to consider two possible problems concerning transcending the limits of subjective idealism.

The *first* concern can be expressed in the form of the question: How can Hegel justify the set of demands which constitute his philosophical position? High demands do not necessarily lead to the reconciliation that is desired. Actually, they most likely have the opposite effect. As it was mentioned in the beginning of the paper, Hegel’s project appeared to many as being too ambitious and his concept of reason as too overpowering.¹¹ Therefore, the need for the reconciliation of different entities seems to be merely based on personal experiences of the young Hegel.¹² In turn, demand for the epistemological position of absolute idealism is grounded in a preliminary decision, that *nous* governs the world, and the system of the *Encyclopedia* seems to merely expose than to really justify this idea. The functional and methodological demands at last result from the need to uncover the reasonable structures in the world—they stand and fall with the chosen epistemological position. The problem of justification hence goes beyond determination—that is, which demands should be made and if they are finally matched—to the question: Why these and not other claims?

¹¹ We can see it clearly, for example, in Max Stirner’s *The Ego and its Own*.

¹² This is the conclusion Habermas comes to in his short analysis of the historical circumstances the young Hegel had to deal with – see JÜRGEN HABERMAS, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, translated by Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1987, 23–27.

The *second* issue of concern is Hegel's understanding of the Kantian faculty of principles. The strong demand for a concept of reason in the sense of universal reasonability conceals certain advantages of the subjective position. One can say Hegel did not actually realize the full meaning of his own words concerning the term *idea*, saying that Kant restored it back to honor, "in that he vindicated it for reason, distinguishing it from the abstract determinations of the understanding and from merely sensible representations" (§ 45). An idea is the most abstract and highest form of representation and a genuine tool of the faculty of reason (in the narrow sense). Reason operates with ideas, whose functions are linked to the specific areas that they are used in. We can differentiate between at least the following seven main types of ideas in Kant: (1) transcendental concepts of reason, which can be used as regulative principles in the theoretical philosophy or systematic natural sciences; (2) simple theoretical ideas like *pure water* or *pure earth*; (3) postulates of practical reason; (4) simple practical, moral, legal and religious ideas like *virtue*, *justice*, *law of nations* or *rational religion*; (5) aesthetic ideas like *beauty* and *sublime*; (6) methodological ideas like the *idea of the whole of jurisprudence* and (7) ideas, which express the notion of reason, like *pure thinking* or *pure will*.

In his description of Kant's concept of reason, Hegel does not differentiate between this wide range of types of ideas and functions which are linked to them. Furthermore, we also learn comparatively less about our faculty of reason, which makes up the center of subjective spirit in the third part of the *Encyclopedia*. This again calls attention to the problem: How should we deal with the different demands which constitute the philosophical content of a theory as well as a possible critique thereof?¹³

Michael Lewin

michael.lewin.di@gmail.com

¹³ I examine the problem of different demands in my current work *Die Begründung der Vernunft und das Problem der unterschiedlichen Ansprüche (The Justification of Reason and the Problem of Different Demands)* using the Kantian and Fichtean concept of reason (in the narrow sense) as an example to analyze positions and counterpositions. More details about the mentioned different types of ideas and the fields they are used in can also be found there.